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ABSTRACT

Raising a child can be the most gratifying (and the most difficult) job a person can have. Communication is essential when parenting children, and practical guidance in learning how to speak openly and listen attentively is presented in this booklet. It gives parents and caregivers concrete tips and techniques on talking with young children, ages 8 to 12, about hard-to-discuss issues, such as sex and sexuality, drugs and alcohol, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), and violence. Since children already receive information about these topics from television, movies, and other sources, it is important that parents provide accurate insights. The text draws on ideas and opinions of child psychiatrists, psychologists, scientists, doctors, and educators. It opens with an overview of what parents need to know before talking with kids, such as issues on child development, and provides ground rules for discussions (e.g., always use age-appropriate language). Each chapter offers tips for initiating discussions, including ways to ensure that you are understanding the child's level of understanding. Sample questions and answers are provided for each topic. A collection of resources lists boys and girls clubs throughout the country; other organizations for information and referral; and reading materials for parents and children, and other information. (RJM)

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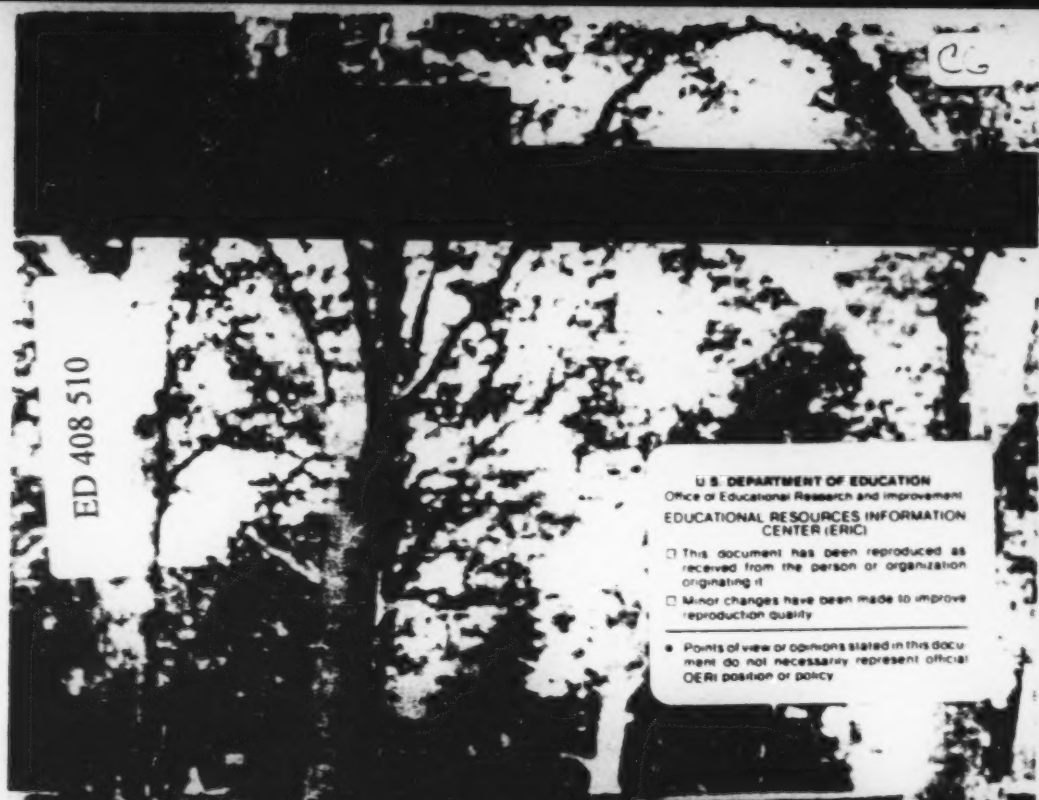

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CHILDREN NOW

# *Talking with Kids About Tough Issues*

*Written by Lynne S. Dumas,*
*author of, "Talking with Your Child About a Troubled World"*

*Photography by Cynthia Sheffer/Pinkie Pictures*

*Graphic Design by Joe Vera/Vera Design*

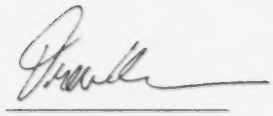
Dear Reader,

We live in challenging times, in which no community is immune to the harsh realities of violence, substance abuse, and life threatening disease. This is not the age many of us recall from our own youth. We yearn to prolong a time of innocence for our children. But we cannot.

From an early age, young boys and girls are forming lifetime attitudes and building the basis for making critical personal decisions. Those attitudes and ideas are shaped each day by an array of messages not only from home, school and friends, but from popular culture and from an increasingly bewildering technological society. Whose voices will break through? Whose should? None is more important than yours.

The suggestions in this book can provide a start, with specific answers to many hard questions. But even when questions go unasked, the conversations suggested here can create an atmosphere of open communication, an atmosphere which will help children know that there is a safe and loving place to reach out with their own concerns.

"Talking with Kids About Tough Issues" is for all of us, whether we really feel confident or simply because we know we must. So start early and talk often. We hope this booklet will help.



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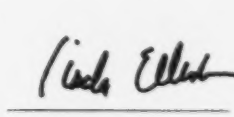

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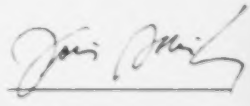

Lois Salisbury
Executive Director
Children Now

*Talking with Kids About Tough Issues* is designed as a helpful resource, a starting-off point to get you thinking about these subjects and discussing them effectively with your child. To begin, start with the chapter titled "First things first;" it offers 13 essential rules of thumb for talking with your child about anything. Then look over the other chapter titles and read them in whichever order matches your — and your child's — needs. Each chapter includes concrete tips (geared to different age levels) for talking about a particular issue, questions that children typically ask and sample answers to guide you in your response. A resource guide for further information is provided for each topic at the end of the booklet.

One final point to keep in mind as you read this booklet: trust yourself. Every child is different. But if you rely on your parental instincts — and most parents have excellent instincts — and take into account the abilities and interest levels of your own unique youngsters, you can effectively apply the information and advice offered here. As you do, you'll become more confident and successful in guiding your children through today's complicated world.

*Talking with Kids about Tough Issues* *is a multi-faceted national campaign using radio and television public service announcements, newspaper and magazine ads, posters, and the Internet to alert adults to the fact that young children are increasingly exposed to difficult and sensitive issues and to encourage them to begin conversations early, before the risk-taking teen years. With the help of local Boys and Girls Clubs, the campaign will provide helpful materials and connect families with resources in their own communities. In partnership with the Advertising Council, the Talking with Kids campaign will reach millions of Americans through major media outlets across the country.*

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation is an independent philanthropy that focuses its grantmaking on the major health issues facing the nation. Established in 1948, the Foundation makes approximately $29 million in philanthropic expenditures each year, emphasizing efforts to improve the health and life chances of the disadvantaged. The Foundation serves as an independent, non-partisan source of facts and analysis for policy makers, the media, and the public. Grants support a range of health related activities, including policy analysis, applied research to define and measure public health problems, demonstration and pilot projects, and communications activities.

Children Now is a nonpartisan, independent voice for America's children. Using innovative research and communications strategies, Children Now promotes pioneering solutions to problems facing America's children. Recognized nationally for its policy expertise, up-to-date information about the status of children, and leading work with the media, Children Now focuses particular attention on the needs of children who are poor or at risk while working to improve conditions for all children by making them a top priority across the nation. Children Now is financed through foundation grants, individual donations, and support from the corporate community.

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*Raising a child is probably the most gratifying job you'll ever have — and one of the toughest. In large part that's because times have changed. Hard as you try to be the best parent you can be, we live in a world that has grown increasingly complex, and that challenges you everyday with a wide array of confusing and disturbing issues that are difficult for children to understand and for adults to explain.*

*We believe this booklet will help. It offers practical guidance in communicating with your children effectively, in learning how to speak openly and listen attentively to them throughout their developing years. And that's important. Because laying the foundation for good communication when children are young increases the likelihood that they will turn to you with their questions and problems as they grow older and be more receptive to the lessons you teach and values you convey.*

*More specifically, this book presents parents and caregivers with concrete tips and techniques on talking with young children ages eight to 12 — though there's useful information for younger and older kids, too — about some of the most sensitive, powerful and hard-to-discuss issues of today's world: sex and sexuality, drugs and alcohol, AIDS, and violence.*

*Now some parents and caregivers may question the appropriateness of discussing these delicate subjects with young children. Maybe you're one of them. But please consider the fact that your kids are already hearing about these issues from TV, movies, magazines, and schoolyard friends. If you don't talk with them — and answer their questions — they'll get their "facts" from someone else. And you'll be denied an invaluable opportunity to offer your children accurate information in a context that's comfortable for you.*

*Also, as the many child psychiatrists, psychologists, scientists, doctors, and educators whose ideas and opinions we've collected and synthesized in this booklet confirm, talking with your children about these topics won't hurt them — but keeping them taboo will. Opening up clear lines of communication with your kids will help them to become happy children, confident teenagers and, finally, healthy, well-adjusted adults.*

# *What You Need to Know Before Talking with Kids About Anything*

Kids grow and learn according to their own timetable. At each age, particularly in the early years, they reach new and exciting developmental levels in their ability not only to move about and explore their world, but to think and react as well.

Before trying to discuss any complex issues with your child, it's important to refresh your memory about these developmental stages. That way, you're less likely to introduce a concept that is beyond the reach of your eight-year-old or too basic for your 12-year-old.

# The Key Developmental Stages

## *Infancy*

During the first year of life, babies begin to learn about their immediate world — their own bodies and whatever else they can touch, see, hear, smell, and feel. Infants also begin to build social bonds; when Mommy or Daddy smiles at them, they respond, smiling and cooing in delight.

## *Toddlerhood*

One- and two-year-olds are curious, intent on exploring anything within reach. They're also beginning to discover their independence, their separateness from Mom or Dad.

## *The Preschool Years*

Three- and four-year-olds see themselves as the center of the universe; if parents divorce and Dad moves out, the four-year-old is likely to believe, "Daddy left home because I was bad." Preschoolers also think in concrete terms. If a four-year-old learns that Uncle Jim has died, his first question typically might be, "Well, where did he go?"

Emotionally, a preschooler's world is either black or white. If Mommy says no to something he wants, he may feel "all mad" at Mommy. He has a hard time understanding that he can be angry at Mommy and love her, too, or that Mommy can be upset and love him at the same time.

## *Early School Age*

Children ages five through seven are highly observant and curious, asking lots of questions in an ongoing effort to make rational sense of the world around them. Since they're beginning to see things from others' point of view, they also can be sympathetic and empathetic. And they can think about two concepts simultaneously; emotionally, that means they're able to understand that Mom and Dad always love them, even when they are punished for being naughty.

By age eight or so, school-age kids are capable of understanding fairly abstract concepts. Whereas a five-year-old may have difficulty grasping the finality of death, the nine-year-old understands that when someone dies, he will never return. Consequently, children in the eight- to 10-year-old age range may think and sometimes worry about the future. They may become more introspective; some start writing journals or keeping diaries. At this age, children move away from magical, "there's-a-monster-under-the-bed," fears and towards more reality-based anxieties like, "Will I pass the spelling test?" and, "Will my classmates like me?"

Eight- to 10-year-olds enjoy interactive play that allows them to demonstrate mastery over their burgeoning physical and intellectual skills. They are resourceful problem-solvers and often work hard at discovering successful solutions.

## *Pre-Adolescence*

Children ages 11 and 12 can think abstractly about pretty complex issues. They are quite capable of thinking in hypothetical terms; they understand that if X were to happen, then Y would result. Children at this stage also have strong short- and long-term memory skills.

Pre-adolescents are also developing a stronger sense of self. They are highly introspective and concerned about their competence; this is the age when peer pressure begins to mount. They are able to feel deep sympathy for and empathy towards others.

Pre-teens also show great interest in what is happening to their bodies, including growth spurts, the appearance of facial and pubic hair, or the onset of menstruation.

# Thirteen essential rules of thumb for talking with kids about anything

*While these developmental stages provide useful insights into how children grow and learn, they are not carved in stone. Each child develops at her own individual pace, and variations are perfectly normal. Nonetheless, understanding these stages helps us to communicate effectively with our children by neither overwhelming them with too much information nor underestimating their ability to grasp the complexities of today's world.*

## 1. Create an open environment

Children have always been curious — but today, they seem to have so much more to be curious about. Movies, music, television, and events in their neighborhoods have exposed them to situations and ideas that pique their interest and trigger questions you never expected, particularly from children so young — questions like, "What's safe sex?" or, "Why do some kids carry guns?"

Yet when it comes to such sensitive subjects as AIDS or violence, children will turn to you for answers only if they feel you will be receptive to their questions. It's up to you, then, to create the kind of atmosphere in which your child can pose any question — on any subject — freely and without fear of consequence.

How do you foster such an atmosphere? Be encouraging, supportive, and positively reinforcing. For example, if your child asks, "How many people have AIDS?" try not to answer with, "How do I know? Just eat your lunch!" no matter how busy you are at the time. Instead, respond with something like, "That's an interesting question, but I'm not sure. Let's look it up after lunch." That way, you not only validate her curiosity but also leave the door open for more discussion later.

## 2. Consider your child's temperament

Whether your child is easygoing or fussy, outgoing or shy will affect the way you respond to his questions. Suppose you are watching the evening news with your child and a segment about a burglary comes on. Your youngster, who tends to be a worrier, asks, "But what if that man comes here and tries to hurt us?" Responding with, "Oh, don't worry about that," will only make him more anxious because you are not taking his concerns seriously.

You have a better chance of calming his fears and opening communication if you say, "That burglary happened 50 miles away, so the chances that the same man will come all the way over here are pretty small. And remember that last year we worked with the police and started a neighborhood watch group? We did it to keep us all safe. And never forget that Mommy and Daddy will always do everything they can to protect you."

## 3. Respect your child's feelings

Allowing children to express their feelings openly will increase the chances that they'll come to you whenever they have a problem. The child who cries because his big sister pushed his pet kitten off the sofa can be better handled by a brief word of comfort — "Kitty's okay. She got a little scared, and your sister shouldn't have been so rough, but she's fine, see?" — than by an angry, "Don't be such a baby. Nobody hurt you!" By legitimizing his feelings, you let him know that he's an important person whose emotions count.

Respecting your child's feelings will also help you understand when he's had enough. Suppose you're answering your nine-year-old's question about AIDS. If after a while he says, "I want to go out and play," or "I don't want to talk about this," back off for now and reintroduce the subject at another time.

## 4. Understand the question

To avoid talking above the head of your youngster, first try to understand what he is asking and what he already knows. If, for instance, your child asks you what crack is, ask him what he thinks crack is. If he says, "I think it's something you eat that makes you act funny," then you have a sense of his level of understanding and can tailor your explanations to fit.

## 5. Always be honest

Whatever your child's age, she deserves honest answers and explanations. That's what strengthens your child's capacity to trust. Also, when you don't provide a straightforward answer, kids make up their own fantasy explanation which can often be more frightening than any real and honest response you could have offered.

## 6. If you don't know something, admit it

Sometimes you might worry that if your children learn that you don't know everything, they won't look up to you. But that's simply not true. Kids accept, "I don't know," and, "Let's find out," — and they're better responses than any false or misleading facts.

You also don't need to answer all questions immediately. If you're negotiating a tricky turn in rush hour traffic when your nine-year-old suddenly asks, "Mom, what's a condom?" it's perfectly okay to say something like, "That's an important question, but with all this traffic, I can't explain it now. Let's talk later, after dinner." And then make sure you do.

## 7. Don't leave big gaps

While you may not want or need to share all the details of a particular situation or issue with your child, try not to leave big gaps, either. Children will fill in the blanks themselves and, in the process, generate a good deal of confusion and concern.

## 8. Use age-appropriate language

Always speak to your child in language she can understand. Trying to explain AIDS to a six-year-old with words like "transmission" and "transfusion" may not be as helpful as using simpler language. Unfortunately, there's no rule that dictates which vocabulary is appropriate for which age; much depends on the individual youngster. The best technique: use simple, short words and straightforward explanations.

## 9. Get feedback

One of the best ways to figure out if your child has understood a certain subject is to ask. Let a little time pass after an important discussion, then ask him to tell you what he remembers about the conversation and what he understands. That way you can correct any misconceptions and fill in missing facts.

## 10. Be patient

As any parent or caregiver knows, it can feel like forever before your youngster gets his story out. As adults, we're tempted to finish the child's sentences for him, filling in words and phrases in an effort to hear the point sometime within this century. Well, resist the impulse. By listening patiently, you'll allow him to think at his own pace, and you'll convey the message that he's worthy of your time.

## 11. Say it again and again

Since most young children can only take in small bits of information at any one time, they won't learn all they need to know about a particular topic from a single discussion. Instead, they'll ask their questions again and again over time until they are able to absorb all they want to know. Such repetition is normal, so be prepared and tolerant. And don't be afraid to initiate discussion repeatedly either. Patience and persistence will serve your children well.

## 12. Give them your undivided attention

How many times do you answer your child's questions while folding clothes, preparing for your next day's meeting, or pushing a shopping cart through the supermarket? For most parents caught up in the hectic routines of contemporary life, making eye contact and giving undivided attention to their concerns becomes an all too rare event.

Still, it's important to find time to talk with your youngster when you can look her in the eye. First, it adds more conviction to your message. Second, it helps build self-esteem by letting her know that she's worthy of your undivided attention.

## *13. Speak separately to kids of different ages*

If your children are widely spaced, it's best to talk with them separately, even about the same subject. The reason is that the children are at varied developmental levels, so they need different information, have different sensitivities, and require a different vocabulary. What's more, older children often will dominate the discussion, which may inhibit the younger ones from speaking up.

*If you've hung in throughout this quick course on child psychology, you're ready to move on. But as you explore the issues that follow — in whatever order you choose to explore them — try to remember the information you've learned here. It will serve you as you and your child tackle the sensitive and complex subjects of the chapters ahead.*

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*Despite what parents and caregivers might think or wish, most children already have heard about Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). A recent University of Vermont study of kids ages six to 12 showed that 62% of first graders had heard of the illness; by the time they reached third grade, 93% had heard of it, mostly through television.*

*Significantly, these youngsters held several misconceptions. Many believed doctors could make people with AIDS well again, and that you could catch AIDS by giving blood. Another disturbing finding: AIDS made these kids both anxious and fearful. They wanted to know, "Will my mommy and daddy die of AIDS?" and, "Will everyone get AIDS and die someday?"*

*This study underscores an important lesson for parents and caregivers: as upsetting and difficult as it may be to broach AIDS with young children, it is essential to do so. Talking about AIDS gives you the opportunity to provide your child with accurate facts and to dispel any unsettling misconceptions. It also allows you to reassure your children of their own, and their family's safety. Finally, discussing AIDS lays the groundwork for any future talks about AIDS-preventative behavior.*

# Talking with kids about AIDS

## *1. Initiate discussion*

While some children readily voice their fears about AIDS, others keep their worries bottled up. To help them deal with their questions and concerns, bring the subject up at the earliest opportunity.

That doesn't mean you should begin a discussion out of the blue. Instead, tie it into something your child sees or hears, such as a public service announcement about AIDS. After you and your eight-year-old watch the ad, say something like, "Have you heard about AIDS before? Well, what do you think AIDS is?" This way, you can find out what he already understands and work from there.

## 2. Stress good health practices

Teaching young children about AIDS begins with laying a strong foundation of good health habits. That means learning the importance of hand washing, brushing teeth, covering your mouth when sneezing or coughing, not drinking from other people's glasses, and never touching anyone else's blood. While only the last will safeguard your child from AIDS, discussing good health practices provides a natural context in which children can then learn about AIDS prevention.

## 3. Present the facts

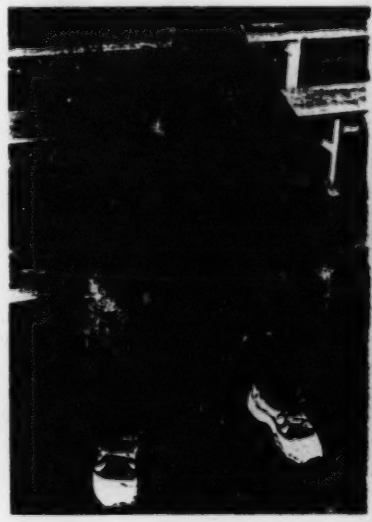
No matter how young your child is, do your best to offer honest information. Just be sure it's tailored to your child's age and level of understanding. To an eight-year-old you might say, "AIDS is a disease that makes people very sick. It's caused by a virus, called the HIV, which is a tiny germ. Chickenpox is also caused by a virus, but it's very different from the kind of virus that causes AIDS. Almost everyone catches chickenpox at sometime in their life, but AIDS is very, very hard to catch. You can't get it from playing with someone who has AIDS or by touching someone who has AIDS. People get AIDS from the blood of someone else who has AIDS. So you should always be very careful never to touch anyone's blood."

It's not necessary to discuss sexual transmission of AIDS with very young children unless they ask, which is unlikely. Children need to be taught about sex and they need to be taught about AIDS. But it's not a good idea for a child's first information about sex to be associated with such a deadly syndrome.

Children of about nine or 10 can be offered additional information, such as, "Your body is made up of billions of cells. Some of these cells help your body stay healthy by fighting off disease. These disease-busters are called T cells. But if you get a virus called HIV, that virus kills the T cells. And when too many T cells get destroyed by HIV, your body cannot fight disease. People whose T cells are destroyed and whose bodies cannot fight disease have AIDS."

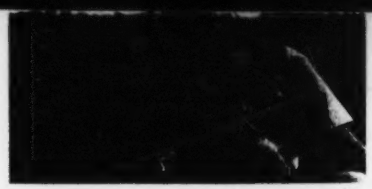
If you've already explained sexual intercourse to your children — and by the time your child is eight or nine you most likely have — you might also add, "During sexual intercourse, the semen from the man's body goes into the woman's body. That semen can carry HIV."

Children ages 11 and 12 should also understand what condoms are and how they can protect people from getting HIV. Pre-teens should also be told that HIV can be transmitted between persons who share drug needles. (If you live in a community where IV drug use is relatively common, you might want to explain the link between sharing needles and AIDS even earlier, to a child as young as eight or nine.)



## *4. Foster self-esteem*

When children feel good about themselves, when they take pride in their bodies and in staying healthy, they are much more likely to withstand peer pressure to have sexual relations before they are ready or to do drugs when they get older. How to build such self-esteem? By offering frequent praise, setting realistic goals, and keeping up with their friends and interests, all of which let your child know that he's a well-loved and worthwhile individual.



## 5. Set them straight

One eight-year-old came home from school in tears because he said, "I fell down and scraped my knee in the schoolyard. It was bleeding, and the kids said I was going to get AIDS and die." As this anecdote shows, children's misconceptions can be pretty scary, so it's important to correct them as soon as possible. The child's mom or dad needed to say something like, "You do not have AIDS. You are fine. You can't catch HIV when you scrape your knee in the schoolyard. The way you catch it is by mixing your blood with the blood of someone who has HIV. Do you understand?"

After such discussions, it's also smart to check back with your child in a few days and say, "Do you remember what AIDS is?" That way, you'll be able to find out what he understood and, if necessary, set the record straight. *Understanding AIDS, particularly for young children, takes more than a single discussion.*

## 6. Reassure your child of his safety

Young children view only issues on a very personal level. With AIDS, they worry that their parents will get it and die, leaving no one to take care of them. Some also worry that they will get AIDS and give it to their parents or brothers and sisters. So it's important to reassure them of their health and safety.

## 7. Put the facts first

AIDS is a disease that evokes strong emotions from many people, since it often is related to sensitive issues, like drug use, sexual activity and homosexuality. No matter how you feel about these issues, try not to let your opinions or feelings prevent you from giving your kids the facts about AIDS and its transmission — it's information that's essential to their health and safety.

## 8. Be prepared to discuss death

Because AIDS is fatal, questions about death may arise. So get ready to answer them. Bookstores and libraries are lined with publications that teach you how. (For some suggested titles, see Readings for Children.) In the meantime, here are three helpful tips:

■ Be honest. Tell your child, in simple terms, what death means — that when someone dies, they don't breathe, or eat, or feel hungry or cold, and that they will never return. Remember, very young children won't be able to conceptualize such finality. But that's okay. Just be patient and repeat the message whenever appropriate.

■ Never explain death in terms of sleep. It may make your child worry that if he falls asleep, he'll never wake up again.

■ Offer reassurance. Tell your child that you are not going to die from AIDS and that he won't either. Stress that while AIDS is serious, it is preventable.

# When AIDS Hits Home

More and more children are experiencing the anguish of AIDS firsthand; they have a close relative or a classmate with HIV or AIDS. Here are some techniques to help you and your child cope:

## *1. Don't be afraid to discuss what's happening*

One young mother of three was devastated to learn that her hemophiliac husband had contracted HIV. Rather than trying to shield her kids — all under age 12 — from the truth, she was open about the illness, telling them that their dad was very sick and answering all their questions. As a result, the children survived the trauma — and the eventual death of their father — quite well. Today they are strong and emotionally healthy, well prepared to meet any other challenges life might have in store for them.

Hopefully, neither you nor your children will ever have to confront such a terrible crisis. But if you do, remember that children whose circumstances force them to face the issues surrounding AIDS often become "developmentally accelerated," which means that they understand more than they normally would at their age. So feel free to be as open as possible and to offer as much information as they are willing to absorb, as often as they are willing to absorb it.

## *2. Try not to make AIDS a family secret*

Understandably, you may be reluctant to tell your child that his mother, father, or other close relative has AIDS. But it's usually best to be honest. If you don't tell your child, someone else might, which could be a lot more traumatic. Also, by telling your child yourself, you can help her deal not only with her anxieties and concerns, but with the pain community prejudice might inflict.

## *3. Calm their fears*

If you haven't discussed the situation before, you can broach the subject by saying something like, "You haven't said much about Uncle Bill's getting so sick. But I want you to know that although sometimes that happens to young people like him, it's rare. You are just fine, and so am I, and so is Grandpa and Grandma. We'll be together for a long, long time and you'll always have someone to take care of you."

# Sample Questions and Answers

## *What is AIDS?*

AIDS is a very serious sickness that is caused by a tiny germ called a virus. When you are healthy, your body can fight off diseases. Even if you do get sick, your body can fight the germs and make you well again. But when you have HIV or AIDS, your body cannot protect you. That's why people with AIDS get very sick.

## *How do you get AIDS?*

You get it by mixing your blood with the blood of someone who has AIDS. You can't get it like you can get a cold or the flu, and you can't get it just by touching or being near someone with AIDS, so you and I don't have to worry about getting it. (NOTE: If you have already talked to your child about sex, you should also add, "You can also get AIDS by having sexual intercourse with someone who has the HIV.")

## *Can kids get AIDS?*

Very few children get AIDS. But if they were born to a woman who had HIV, they could get HIV when they were born. A long time ago, some kids who had hemophilia got AIDS when they got blood. But that doesn't happen anymore. AIDS is mostly a disease of grownups. (Note: If your child already knows about the link between sexual intercourse and AIDS and IV drug use and AIDS, you might also add, "Sometimes, teenagers who have unprotected sexual intercourse or share drug needles get AIDS."

## *Does everybody who gets AIDS die?*

Today, there is no cure for AIDS. Some people who get HIV can live for many, many years, and some who are diagnosed with AIDS may live for only a few weeks. But until doctors find a cure, everyone who gets AIDS is likely to die.

## *Can you get AIDS from a condom?*

Remember when we talked about how a person can get HIV if he (or she) has sexual intercourse with someone who already has HIV or AIDS? Well, if a man wears a latex condom during intercourse, he can reduce his chances of getting giving HIV through sex. So condoms actually help protect you from getting HIV.

## *Do all gay people get HIV?*

No. Homosexual people get HIV the same way heterosexual people do. And they can protect themselves the same way, too. (Note: As this example shows, children's questions about AIDS are sometimes linked to the issue of homosexuality. You'll find the organizations and readings listed at the end of the booklet useful in helping you answer such questions.)

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*Do all grownups have sex? Am I supposed to have sex when I go on dates? These are the kinds of questions many parents dread, for they not only signal your child's curiousity about sex and sexuality — and unmistakably indicate that he or she is a sexual human being — but also evoke your own discomfort with the subject. Additionally, such questions underscore your responsibility in shaping your child's sexual attitudes and behaviors — a role that can exert weighty pressure upon conscientious moms and dads.*

*Most parents want to do their best in talking with their kids about sex and sexuality. But they're often not sure how to begin. In fact, one of the most pressing questions on the minds of parents who want to talk with their children about sex is, "What should my child know and when should she know it?" Here's what the experts say:*

# Talking with kids about sex and sexuality

■ By age five, children should be familiar with the correct terms for sexual body parts, and how babies get in and out of a woman's body.

■ By ages six-eight, children should be able to use biological terms — including vulva, vagina, breast, penis, scrotum, and testicles — correctly and not have to rely on "cute" family labels to talk about body parts.

■ By ages nine-11, children should know that sexual feelings are normal and natural, the biological facts about how babies are born, including how the reproductive cycle works, and the physical and emotional changes girls and boys undergo in puberty.

■ By ages 12-13, pre-teens should understand that sexual relationships bring pleasure as well as responsibility, that abstinence is a desirable alternative for young people, that teenage pregnancy and parenting often bring a loss of personal freedom and emotional, psychological and financial burdens. They should also know that you can prevent pregnancy with birth control, learn about different contraceptives, know what sexually transmitted diseases are and understand how they're transmitted, prevented, and treated.

Sound overwhelming? It doesn't have to be. Just remember that effective parent-to-child sex education has just four simple goals: (1) to provide accurate information; (2) to explain that sex is more than physical, and involves feelings and responsibilities; (3) to transmit your own family's values; (4) to safeguard your children by laying a foundation that will help prevent risky behavior later on.

## *1. Explore your own attitudes about sex and sexuality*

If you're comfortable with sex, you'll impart that attitude to your children. If you're uneasy, you'll communicate that, too. So before you talk with your kids, explore your own feelings and see where you stand — then decide whether you want to convey these same attitudes to your children. If you do, fine. But if you're like most parents — more uncomfortable with the subject than you'd like your children to be — read some books about sex (see "Readings for Parents") and discuss your feelings with a trusted friend, relative, physician or member of the clergy. The more you examine the subject, the more confident you'll feel in discussing it.

Even if you can't quite overcome your discomfort, making sex a taboo topic isn't wise. Some studies show that kids who feel they can talk to their parents about sex — because their parents speak openly and listen attentively to them — actually engage in less sexual activity and high-risk behavior as teens than kids who've learned not to broach the subject. So it's okay to say something like, "You know, I'm uncomfortable talking about sex because my parents never talked to me about it. But I want us to be able to talk about anything — including sex — so please come to me if you have any questions. If I don't know the answer, I'll find out."

## *2. Start Early*

Waiting until your children are teenagers to have "The Talk" is not a good idea. First of all, by the time they reach adolescence, their attitudes about sex are already shaped. Secondly, your child won't be able to take in enough information if you try to force feed them all at one time. Education about sex

and sexuality should be a gentle, continuous flow of information that should begin as early as possible — for instance, with teaching your toddler where his nose and toes are, and including "this is your penis" or "this is your vulva" in your talks. You continue their sex education by adding more material gradually, as your child matures.

## 3. Take the initiative

Most children start asking questions about sex well before they're old enough to enter school. But if your child hasn't, you need to bring the subject up. Just look for an opportune moment, like this one: the mother of your eight-year-old's best friend is pregnant. You can say, "Did you notice that David's mom's tummy is getting bigger? That's because she's going to have a baby and she's carrying the new baby inside her. Do you know how the baby got inside her?" Then let the conversation move from there.

Don't worry that talking about sex is going to make your child want to have sex. If you make sure that your conversation reinforces your values and beliefs about sex, they'll better understand when you think sexual activity is appropriate.

## 4. Give accurate, age-appropriate information

Parents often worry that talking about sex might confuse and frighten their young child. What's more likely to happen if you give too many details too soon is that your child will simply tune you out, much as you would some speaker who was droning on about a subject you didn't understand.

Instead, it's best to talk about sex in a way that fits the age and stage of your child. If your eight-year-old asks about why boys and girls change so much physically as they grow, you can say something like, "The body has special chemicals called hormones that tell it whether to become a boy or a girl. A boy has a penis and testicles; as he grows into a man, he gets hair on his face and his voice gets lower. A girl has a vulva and a vagina, and when she gets older, her breasts get bigger and her hips get rounder."

If your 11-year-old asks, "Why do girls mature faster than boys?" you might say, "Your genes determine how and when the body will grow. Sexual development is also influenced by a gland in your brain which, following directions from your genes, releases chemicals called hormones into the blood. Boys and girls have different hormones. Girls usually begin maturing somewhere between eight and 12, while boys begin maturing between 10 and 16. But some people start earlier and some later. There is no 'normal' time to begin maturing."

## *5. Pay attention to non-verbal questions, too*

Some children don't ask lots of questions about sex. But that doesn't mean they're not curious. Your children may begin to become curious and take a peek into the adult section of a video store or get a copy of a magazine like *Playboy*. When this happens, you can say, "It's understandable that you are curious about men's and women's bodies and sex. If you'd like to talk about it, I'd be happy to, or I can get you information on sex and sexuality for you to read."

## *6. Give the total picture*

While children need to know the biological facts about sex, they also need to understand that sexual relationships involve caring and concern. If your child is in his pre-teen years, you need to include some messages about the consequences and responsibilities of sexual decisions.

Specifically, conversations with 11- and 12-year-olds should include talks about unwanted pregnancy. You can say something like, "I know we've already talked about what sexual intercourse is, and how babies are made, but have you ever thought about what it would be like to have a baby for real? Babies are cute, but they're a gigantic responsibility. Because being a parent is a 24-hour-a-day job, there's hardly any time to be with your friends. You might have to leave school and go to work to earn money to support your baby. Becoming a mom or dad is wonderful when you're grown up, but it's just too hard when you're a teenager."

Such conversations can lead nicely into talks focusing on how your children can protect themselves (or their partners) from getting pregnant when they are older. You should also include information as to how they can protect themselves (and their partners) from acquiring any sexually transmitted diseases.

Here's another tip: one subject many parents frequently overlook when discussing sex is dating. In the movies, two characters meet and twenty seconds later, they're in bed. But children need to know that in real life, there's time to get to know each other — time to hold hands, go bowling, see a movie, or just talk. This is an important part of a caring relationship.

## *7. Anticipate the next stage of development*

Imagine how frightened 10-year-old Ellen was when she got her first period. Never anticipating she'd begin maturing so early, her parent hadn't mentioned menstruation to her yet, so when she saw the blood, she thought she was dying.

To forestall such confusion and anxiety, talk to your children not only about their current stage of development, but about the next stage, too. An eight-year-old girl is old enough to learn about menstruation, just as a boy that age is ready to learn how his body will change.

## *8. Don't jump to conclusions*

You find a condom in your 10-year-old's jacket. If you panic and demand to know if he's having sex, you'll push him away and deny him — and yourself — the opportunity for important communication. Instead, take a deep breath, think about the message you want to convey, and when you are calm, try a more open-ended approach like, "I found this condom in your pocket when I was doing the laundry. What's up?" That way, you give your child the chance to explain and yourself the chance to listen — for all you know, he may have found the condom package on the street, been curious, and tucked it into his pocket to examine in the privacy of his room. By remaining calm and listening attentively, you'll create a safe moment for frank discussion.

## 9. Don't feel pressured to answer immediately

You're in line in a crowded supermarket when out of the blue your eight-year-old blurts out, "Mom, what's an erection?" Though your face may redden as you hear the snickers of other shoppers, you won't be "failing" your child if you don't answer immediately. It's perfectly okay to say, "That's a good question, but it's something we need to talk about in private, when we get home." Just be sure to return to the subject at the appropriate time.

## 10. Communicate your values

It's not only your right but your responsibility to let your children know your sexual values. Although they may not adopt these values as they mature, at least they'll be aware of them as they struggle to figure out how they feel and want to behave.

## 11. Relax

Don't worry about knowing all the answers to your children's questions; what you know is a lot less important than how you respond. If you can convey the message that no subject, including sex, is forbidden in your home, you'll be doing just fine.

## Sample Questions and Answers

### *How come girls don't have a penis?*

Boys have a penis to urinate through and to help them make a baby when they get older and meet someone they love. Girls have a vulva that does many of the same things as a penis, although it looks different. The vulva has an opening inside through which urine passes and an opening called a vagina for making babies when they get older and meet a man they love.

### *Does everybody have sex?*

Most adults who love and care for each other do have sex. But you never have to have sex unless you want to.

### *Does everyone who has sexual intercourse get AIDS?*

No. It's true that if you have sexual intercourse with someone who has HIV, you could get AIDS, especially if the man doesn't wear a condom. But if neither partner has HIV, they can't get AIDS from each other, even if they have sexual intercourse together.

### *What's safe sex?*

If two people have sexual intercourse, and one of them has HIV, that person could give HIV to his (or her) partner. Doctors believe that if the man wears a condom whenever he has intercourse, he protects himself and his partner from giving each other HIV. That's why people call sexual intercourse using a latex condom "safe sex." (See the AIDS chapter for more AIDS-related questions and answers.) You may also use a question like this as an opportunity to point out that abstaining from sexual intercourse is a good idea for teens. There are other ways to show affection. However, if a teen is engaging in sexual intercourse, it is vitally important that they practice "safe sex."

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*We live in a violent world, so it is not surprising that our children see images of violence everywhere — in the media, in their neighborhoods, their schools, perhaps even in their homes. The American Psychological Association estimates that by the time the average American child finishes elementary school, he has watched 8,000 murders and 100,000 acts of violence on television. In some urban areas, approximately two-thirds of children ages six and seven have witnessed violence firsthand, including arrests, muggings, and the use of illegal weapons.*

*Children are also at times the victims of violence. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) reports that every day 10 American children ages 18 and under are killed by handguns; many more are wounded. Such pervasive violence does not leave our children unscathed. It can threaten not only their physical well-being, but their emotional health as well, making them feel frightened, unsafe, and insecure. It also teaches them that violence is the normal result of conflict and that using weapons and resorting to violent action are acceptable ways to behave.*

*Yet there's hope. Even in our turbulent world, parents and caregivers have the ability to raise healthy, confident, secure children, who know how to resolve conflicts peaceably. Here are some effective, time-tested tactics.*

# Talking with kids about violence

## *1. Acknowledge children's fears and reassure them of their safety*

Children who have experienced or witnessed violence firsthand, as well as those who have only seen violent acts on TV or in the movies, may become anxious and fearful. It's important to reassure your child that his personal world will remain safe by saying something like this to your seven- or eight-year-old: "I know that you feel a little scared by what you saw on the news, but you'll be fine. I am here to protect you and take care of you just like always." An older child of 10 or 11 might be comforted by a few added details: "Dad and I are not the only ones who are watching over you. The police

work hard to help keep our neighborhood safe. At school, the teachers look out for your safety. And last year, we installed a burglar alarm in our house as an added measure of protection."

## *2. Set strict rules about weapons*

Teach your child that real guns and knives are very dangerous, and that they can hurt and even kill people. When your child is old enough to understand — and that is certainly by the time she's turned eight or nine — you might say, "I know that in the cartoons you watch, and video and computer games you play, the characters are always shooting each other. They never get hurt; they just pop up again later, like nothing ever happened. But in real life when someone gets shot, they get seriously hurt; lots of times, they even die. So if you ever see a gun anywhere, like at a friend's house or in the schoolyard, never touch it. Instead, tell an adult, like your Mom or me or your teacher, right away. That way, you'll stay safe and help make sure no one else gets hurt either."

## *3. Take special precautions with guns in your home*

At least 25 million American households keep handguns, according to the AACAP. And since many of these households also have an active, curious, and playful child around, the combination can be deadly. So if you own a gun, be sure to take these precautions:

- Store the weapon, unloaded, in a securely locked container;
- Put the contained gun out of your child's reach, in a location that only you (and your spouse) know about;
- Keep guns and ammunition in separate, locked locations;
- When handling or cleaning your firearm, never leave it unattended, even for a few seconds;
- Teach your child never to touch your gun unless you or another adult you trust is there to supervise.

One more point: In some states Child Accident Prevention (CAP) laws make it a crime to have a loaded firearm within easy reach of a child. So if you don't take appropriate safety measures, you're not only endangering your youngster's health but may be breaking the law as well. (To find out if your state has a CAP law, call your local police precinct or the state Attorney General's office.)

## *4. De-glamorize gangs*

Some children live and learn in neighborhoods not threatened by gangs. Others aren't so fortunate. If you believe your child might be exposed — or attracted — to a gang, be sure to bring the subject up. Look for an opportune moment — say you see an ad for a movie that glamorizes gang life — and comment, "You know, sometimes it seems like joining a gang might be cool. But it's not cool. Kids in gangs get hurt — lots of them even get killed — because gangs solve their problems through violence. Really smart kids chose friends who are fun to be with and won't put them in any danger."

## *5. Control your own behavior*

When it comes to learning how to behave, children often follow their parents' lead — which is why it's important to examine how you yourself approach conflict. Do you resort to violence to solve disputes? When you and your children disagree, do you problem-solve a solution with them or demand blind obedience? When you're angry, do you frequently yell or use physical force? If you want your children to shun violence and learn to resolve conflicts peacefully, model that behavior for them.

## *6. Discipline for their sake, not yours*

If you're tired and upset after a long and frustrating day, take time to calm down before doling out discipline to a youngster who misbehaves. That way, you can be sure that you're not punishing your child in order to vent your anger or reaffirm your feelings of power and dominance.

Most experts agree that the best forms of discipline are "time-outs" — a few moments that the child spends alone cooling off and thinking about what she's done — and the taking away of a favorite activity for a brief period, like no watching TV for the rest of the week. These non-violent tactics let your child

know that you won't tolerate inappropriate behavior. And they're more effective than frequent spankings which convey the message that physical force is the best way to settle disputes.

## *7. Encourage them to talk it out*

No matter how scary an event is to a child — and witnessing violence is among the scariest — children feel better when they can talk about their feelings. It lifts the burden of having to face their fears all alone and offers an emotional release. So if you sense that a violent event (whether real or fictional) has upset your youngster, encourage him to express his feelings by saying something like, "That TV program we saw seemed pretty scary to me. What did you think about it?" and seeing where the conversation leads.

## *8. Monitor the media*

Both the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychological Association say that violence in the media can cause violence in real life. Watching certain TV shows and movies — and playing violent video games — can desensitize children and could encourage them to commit their own aggressive acts.

Parents and caregivers need to tone down the effect of these violent messages. Here's how:

- Actively supervise your child's exposure to all forms of media violence;
- Limit TV viewing to those programs you feel are appropriate;
- Be selective about which movies your child sees, and which video and computer games he plays;
- Counterbalance the violent messages your youngster gets.

Within the next year or so, a new technology and rating system called the v-chip will allow parents to block programs that are evaluated according to their violent content. Watch for the v-chip's availability and see if it is a tool you would find helpful.

Suppose, for example, that you're watching a movie with your nine-year-old and a violent scene comes on. After it's over, you might say, "Did you see that man get shot? I know he's a bad guy, and this is just make-believe. But in real life people who get shot may have families and children, and when they die, it's very sad. Movies don't tell you about that part, though."

Here's another example: you're watching the local news with your 12-year-old and hear a report of a slaying. You might say, "You know, it seems like every time we watch the news we hear about someone getting into a fight and getting killed. But that's a really poor way to settle an argument. Let's think of some other ways people could use to settle their differences." (If your child comes up with some good suggestions, praise her. If not, suggest some alternatives yourself, like talking things out, or getting a "neutral" third person to intercede.)

## *9. Take a stand*

Don't cave in to your child's assertion that, "Everybody else does it (or has seen it)," when it comes to allowing him to play an excessively violent game (or to watch an inappropriate movie). You have a right and responsibility to say, "I don't like the message that game sends. Violence is bad and hurts people, but that game makes violence seem like fun. I know that you played the game at your friend's house, but I don't want it played in our house."

## *10. Set firm limits regarding children's actions toward others*

If you tolerate your child's hitting or screaming at someone else, you teach her that angry, violent actions go unpunished and may even get her what she wants. So be clear that such behavior isn't permitted. If you see your child strike another, impose a "time out" to let her collect herself. Once she calms down, invite her to explain why she smacked the child, but tell her firmly that "hitting is not allowed." Then help her figure out a peaceable way to settle the problem.

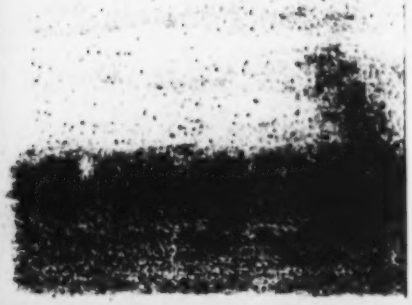
## *11. Step in when necessary*

When two kids are arguing, steer clear as long as possible so that the children have the chance to resolve the dispute themselves. But don't go too far away. If the disagreement turns (or is about to turn) violent, intervene and follow these conflict-resolving steps:

- Separate the children;
- Let each one tell his side of the story;
- Ask them to come up with ways to settle their dispute;
- Encourage them to choose one non-violent solution (or, if they can't, do it for them);
- Try the solution out;
- Praise them if they settle their quarrel non-violently.

## *12. Provide acceptable, safe outlets for children's anger*

It's perfectly normal for children to feel angry and frustrated sometimes, particularly when they don't get their way. But to help forestall any violent behavior that may erupt from these feelings, help your children channel their aggression into acceptable play. Introduce your seven-year-old to the joys of a pillow fight. Allow your nine-year-old to release tension by punching a punching bag. Encourage your 11-year-old to get up a game of soccer. Just remember: the more rigorous the play, the better.



## 13. Encourage cooperation

Violence rarely occurs in an atmosphere of cooperation. So foster a sense of teamwork by sharing family chores — one child can hold the trash bag while the other rakes leaves into it — or activities like helping you bake a cake for Grandma's birthday.

## 14. Hold family meetings

Regularly scheduled family meetings can provide children (and adults) with an acceptable place to air their grievances and voice their opinions. Just be sure that everyone gets a chance to speak. And no name calling allowed!

## 15. Form an alliance with other parents

In order to present children with a consistent, anti-violence message, speak with the parents of your children's friends and try to come to an agreement about what your children can and cannot view or play in your respective homes.

You should also ask other parents and caregivers if there is a gun in their home; if there is, talk with them to make sure they've taken the necessary safety measures. Having this conversation may seem a little awkward, but keep this in mind: the AACAP reports that nearly 40% of accidental handgun shootings of children under 16 occurred in the homes of friends and relatives. So start talking today!

## 16. Ask the schools to get involved

Encourage your child's school to teach conflict-resolution skills, offer "peer mediation" programs (where children negotiate settlements in their fellow schoolmates' disputes), and train teachers in de-escalating and preventing violence.

## *Is it ever okay to fight? What if somebody hits you first?*

Usually, it's not okay to fight because in most situations, there are better ways to handle an argument, like talking things out so you can understand how the other person feels and he can understand how you feel. Sometimes, you may have to go away and think about it, then come back later and talk things through together.

I know that if somebody hits you first, it's hard not to hit back. I understand that you might be angry, and want to defend yourself. The trouble is that the violence just goes on and on —he hits you, you hit him, then he hits you, and so forth, and the problem never gets resolved. The best thing to do is to walk away until you both cool off, then try to figure out a solution together.

## *Why do some kids carry guns?*

Because they think it's cool; they think it makes them tougher. But they're wrong. Carrying a gun puts you and others in real danger; you could get hurt badly, or hurt someone else badly. Plus it's against the law for someone your age to carry a gun. They are a lot smarter ways to be cool and take care of yourself than carrying a gun.

## *In the movies, guys like Steven Seagal and Arnold Schwarzenegger fight all the time and everybody says they're heroes. How come?*

The people you mentioned are just actors playing a part; if they acted like that in real life they'd probably be in jail or dead. What's more, I don't think anybody who blows people up and hurts them is a hero. I don't think that anyone who relies on violence all the time is very smart or brave at all.

## *Peter got a cool toy gun for his birthday. It looks so real. Will you buy me one?*

Your Dad and I think that playing and pretending are important things for kids to do. But toy guns can look very real and can scare people — and that can be very dangerous for kids. So in our house, we've decided not to allow any guns, including toy guns.

## *A kid in my class said some guys drove by in a car and shot her brother on the street. He didn't do anything to them. Why did they do that?*

What happened to your classmate's brother is a very sad and terrible thing. And sometimes terrible things can happen even when people don't do anything wrong. There's so much violence and so many guns in our country that things like this do happen ... but many adults are working very hard to stop it. Mom and I do our best to help you stay safe; we do everything we can to protect you. That's why we don't let you go out alone at night and why we always want to know where you are and who you're with. And there are lots of other people, like the police, whose job it is to make sure that children like you stay safe.

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*The subject of drugs can be very confusing to young children. If drugs are so dangerous, why is the family medicine cabinet chocked full of them? If alcohol is so bad for you, why do Mom and Dad drink wine at dinner?*

*It's not just parents who send mixed messages about drugs and alcohol. While public service announcements and school based educational programs warn about the danger of substance use: movies, TV, music, and advertising often glamorize it.*

*Parents and caregivers need to help their kids sort out the facts from fiction. And it's not too soon to begin. The average age that a child first tries alcohol is 11; for marijuana, it's 12. And many kids start becoming curious about these substances even sooner. So let's get started!*

# Talking with kids about drugs and alcohol

## *1. Listen carefully*

Student surveys reveal that when parents listen attentively to their children's concerns and feelings, kids feel comfortable talking to them, and are more likely to stay drug-free.

## *2. Let kids know it's okay to act independently*

This is particularly important since peer pressure is one of the main reasons kids try drugs. So if everyone in the family except your eight-year-old daughter wants to go on the roller coaster, don't force her to go or insist the entire family skip the ride. Instead, let her know that it's okay to act independently from the group.

## *3. Role play how to say no*

Role play ways in which your child can refuse to go along with his friends without becoming a social outcast. Try saying something like this to your nine-, 10-, or even 12-year-old: "Let's play a game. Suppose you and your friends are at Andy's house after school and they find some beer in the refrigerator and ask you to join them in drinking it. The rule in our family is children are not allowed to drink any alcohol. What could you say?"

If your child comes up with a good response, commend him. If he doesn't, offer a few suggestions like, "No, thanks. Let's play Nintendo instead," or "No, thanks. I don't drink beer. I need to keep in shape for basketball practice."

## *4. Encourage choice*

Allow your child plenty of opportunity to become a confident decision-maker. An eight-year-old can choose the outfit she wants to wear to school today. A nine-year-old is capable of deciding if she wants to invite lots of friends to her birthday party or just a close pal or two. A 12-year-old can choose whether she wants to go out for basketball or join the school band. As your child becomes skilled at making all kinds of good choices, both you and she will feel more secure in her ability to make the right decision concerning drugs and alcohol if and when the time arrives.

## *5. Provide age-appropriate information*

Make sure that the information you offer fits your child's age and cognitive level. When your six- or seven-year-old is brushing his teeth, you can say, "There are lots of things we need to do to keep our bodies strong and healthy, like brushing our teeth. But there are also some things that we shouldn't do because they can hurt our bodies, like smoking or taking any medicines when we are not sick."

An eight-year-old can understand a simple lesson about specific drugs, like marijuana or alcohol. If you're watching TV and marijuana is mentioned, take advantage of the opportunity to say something like, "Do you know what marijuana is? It's a bad drug that can hurt your body." If your child has more questions, answer them. If not, let it go. Short, simple comments, initiated by you and repeated often enough, will get the message across.

You can offer older children the same message, but add more drug-specific information. For example, explain to your 10- to 12-year-olds what marijuana and crack look like, their street names, and how they can affect the body.

And don't be afraid to talk tough. You can say, "Cocaine and crack are very dangerous and illegal drugs that could kill you even if you take them just once."

## 6. Establish a clear family position on drugs

It's okay simply to say, "We don't allow any drug use, and children in this family are not allowed to drink alcohol. The only time you can take any drugs is when the doctor or Mom and Dad give you medicine because you are sick. We made that rule because we love you very much and know that drugs can hurt your body and make you very sick; some may even kill you. Does anyone have any questions?"

## 7. Teach children to follow rules

Establishing a family policy toward drugs won't do much good unless your children already know how to obey rules. That's why it's best to give them practice in compliance by setting up — and expecting them to obey — rules for everyday situations first.

For a five- or six-year-old, the rule may be as simple as, "You must always hold Mommy's hand when you cross the street. There is lots of traffic and I don't want you to get hit by a car." For an eight- or nine-year-old, a rule might be, "No throwing balls in the living room. Too many things in there could break." For a 10- or 11-year- old, "No TV until after all homework is all done. It's important that you concentrate on your assignment, and the TV is too distracting." Once he knows there's a price to pay, he's more likely to listen when you set firm rules about drugs and alcohol.

## 8. Do the right thing

If your kids see you drinking to excess or taking drugs irresponsibly, it completely undercuts your well-intentioned discussions. So after an exhausting day at work, try not to reach for a beer the minute you walk in the door; it conveys the message that drinking is the best way to unwind. If you're having company for dinner, offer non-alcoholic beverages to your guests in addition to wine and spirits. And take care not to pop pills, even over-the-counter remedies, indiscriminately. Your behavior needs to reflect your belief that drugs and alcohol must be used both responsibly and sparingly.

## 9. Discuss what makes a good friend

Again, since peer pressure is so important when it comes to kids' involvement with drugs and alcohol, it makes good sense to talk about what makes a good friend. To a seven-year-old you can say, "A good friend is someone you like and whom you like to play with." To a nine-year-old you might say, "A good friend is someone who enjoys the same games and activities you do and who is fun to be around."

A 11-or 12-year-old can understand that a friend is someone who shares their values and experiences, respects their decisions (and whose decisions they respect), and listens to their feelings. Once you've gotten these concepts across, your children will understand that "friends" who pressure them to drink or smoke pot aren't friends at all.

## 10. Encourage social skills

Research shows that kids who don't have good friends are more likely to get involved with drugs and alcohol than kids who have close relationships with their peers. Encouraging social skills like sharing and cooperation will help your children make and maintain good friendships as they mature.

## 11. Build self-esteem

When kids feel good about themselves, they are much less likely to turn to illegal substances to get high than if they feel worthless. As parents, you can do many things to enhance your child's self-image.

■ Offer lots of praise. Congratulate your seven-year-old on the wonderful painting he did at school; tell your 10-year-old how proud you are that she ran for class president even though she lost the election.

■ Criticize the action, not the person. If your eight-year-old gets a math problem wrong, it's better to say, "I think you added wrong. Let's try it again," than tearing him down by exclaiming, "What's the matter with you? Are you stupid?"

■ Assign manageable chores. A six-year-old can bring her plate to the sink after dinner; an eight-year-old can water the plants every week; an 11-year-old can feed and walk the dog after school each day. Performing such duties and being praised for mastering them helps your child feel good about himself.

■ Spending one-on-one time with your youngster. Setting aside at least 15 uninterrupted minutes per child per day to talk, play a game, or take a walk lets him know you care.

■ Say, "I love you." Nothing will make your child feel better.

## *12. Stress assessment skills*

Movies, music, and TV barrage kids with distorted messages about drugs and alcohol, making it seem that using these substances is cool. Fortunately, you can help counteract these messages by helping children learn to assess whatever they view.

The next time you and your seven-year-old see a toy commercial, try saying, "That commercial makes that toy look like fun. But I'm not so sure it will be so much fun without all that great music and special effects. They don't come with the toy; the advertiser put that into the commercial so kids will want to buy it."

When you and your 11-year-old see a beer or wine commercial, you can say, "Hmm, those people look like their having a good time. After all, the company who made the commercial want you to buy their beer. But what they don't show you is those people throwing up after they had too much to drink." Once your kids get the hang of it, they'll start pointing out discrepancies to you!

## *13. Encourage fun, healthful activities*

Children who are very involved in wholesome activities, like after-school activities or sports, are more likely to make friends and develop interests that will keep them away from drugs.

## *14. Repeat the message*

Information and lessons about drugs are important enough to bear frequent repeating. So be sure to answer your child's questions as often as he asks them and to initiate conversation whenever the opportunity arises.

## *15. If you suspect a problem, seek help*

While kids under 12 rarely develop a substance problem, it can — and does — happen. If your child becomes withdrawn, loses weight, starts doing poorly in school, turns extremely moody, has glassy eyes — or if the drugs in your medicine chest seem to be disappearing too quickly — talk with your child and reach out to any one of the organizations listed here. You'll be helping your youngster to a healthier, happier future.

# Sample Questions and Answers

## *Why are some drugs good and some drugs bad for you?*

When you get sick, the drugs the doctor gives you will help you get better. But if you take these drugs when you're healthy, they can make you sick. Also, there are some drugs, like marijuana or crack, that are never good for you. To be safe, never ever take any drugs unless Mommy, Daddy or the doctor says it's okay.

## *Why do people take bad drugs?*

There are lots of reasons. Maybe they don't know how dangerous drugs are. Or maybe they feel bad about themselves or are don't know how to handle their problems. Or maybe they don't have parents they can talk to. Why do you think they do?

## *You and Dad drink beer and wine. Why can't I?*

Beer and wine contain alcohol. When you're young and your body is still growing, alcohol can keep you from growing strong and healthy and so you are not allowed to drink anything with alcohol in it until you are an adult.

*Boys and Girls Clubs throughout the country have joined the "Talking with Kids" campaign as community partners.*

Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston
50 Congress St. Suite 730
Boston, MA 02109

Boys & Girls Clubs of Broward County
1401 N.E. 26th Street
Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33305

Boys & Girls Clubs of Chicago
625 West Jackson Blvd. , Suite 300
Chicago, IL 60661

Boys & Girls Club of Greater Kansas City
6301 Rockhill Road, Suite 305
Kansas City, MO 64131

Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater New Orleans
671 Rosa Ave. Suite 217
Metarie, LA 70005

Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Sacramento
555 Capitol Mall, Suite 435
Sacramento, CA 95814

Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Salt Lake
450 South 900 East, Suite 300
Salt Lake City, UT 84102

Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Washington
1320 Fenwick Lane, Suite 800
Silver Springs, MD 20910

Boys & Girls Clubs of Indianapolis
5532 W. Raymond Street
Indianapolis, IN 46241

Boys & Girls Clubs of King County
107 Cherry, Suite 200
Seattle, WA 98104

Boys & Girls Clubs of Metropolitan Philadelphia, Inc.
1518 Walnut Street, Suite 712
Philadelphia, PA 19102

Boys & Girls Clubs of Metropolitan Phoenix
2645 N. 24th Street
Phoenix, AZ 85008

Boys & Girls Clubs of Minneapolis
2323 11th Ave. South
Minneapolis, MN 55404

Boys & Girls Club of Oklahoma County
1150 N.W. 36th Street
Oklahoma City, OK 73118

Boys & Girls Clubs of Southeastern Michigan
3826 Livernois Avenue
Detroit, MI 48210

Boys & Girls Clubs of Western Pennsylvania
4412 Butler Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15201

Challengers Boys & Girls Club
5029 S. Vermont Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90037

Madison Square Boys & Girls Clubs
301 East 29th Street
New York, NY 10016

San Francisco Boys & Girls Club
1950 Page Street
San Francisco, CA 94117

# *First things first*

## Organizations for Information and Referral

American Academy of Child and
Adolescent Psychiatry
3615 Wisconsin Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20016
(202) 966-7300

American Academy of Pediatrics
141 Northwest Point Boulevard
P.O. Box 927, Department C
Elk Grove Village, IL 60009-0927

American Psychological Association
1200 Seventeenth Street., NW
Washington, D.C. 20036
(202) 955-7710

American Psychiatric Association
Div. of Public Affairs
1400 K Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20005
(202) 682-6220

## Readings for Parents

Chess, Stella and Alexander Thomas.
*Know Your Child: An Authoritative Guide for Today's Parents.*
New York: Basic Books, 1989.

Faber, Adele and Elaine Mazlish.
*How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & How to Listen So Kids Will Talk.*
Mamaroneck, N.Y: International Center for Creative Thinking, 1990.

Leach, Penelope.
*Your Growing Child: From Babyhood to Adolescence.*
New York: Knopf, 1986.

Spock, Benjamin, with Michael B. Rothenberg.
*Dr. Spock's Baby & Child Care.*
New York: Pocket Books, 1992.

# *Talking with kids about AIDS*

## Organizations for Information and Referral

AIDS Action Council
1875 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20009
(202) 986-1300

AIDS Action Committee
131 Clarendon Street
Boston, MA 02116
1-800-235-2331

American Foundation for AIDS Research (AMFAR)
733 Third Avenue
12th Floor
New York, NY 10017
(212) 682-7440

American Red Cross
AIDS Education Office
8111 Gatehouse Road
Falls Church, VA 22042
(202) 737-8300
(703) 206-6000

Association for the Care of Children's Health
7910 Woodmont Avenue
Suite 300
Bethesda, MD 20814
(301) 654-6549

National AIDS Information Clearinghouse
P.O. Box 6003
Rockville, M.D. 20849-6003
1-800-458-5231

National AIDS Hotline
1-800-342-2437

Los Angeles Pediatric AIDS Network (LAPAN)
6430 Sunset Boulevard
Suite 1003
Los Angeles, CA 90028
(213) 669-5616

Pediatric AIDS Foundation
1311 Colorado Avenue
Santa Monica, CA 90404
(310) 395-9051

Mother's Voices
165 W. 46th St.
Suite 701
New York, NY 10036
1-888-686-4237

## Readings for Parents

America Responds to AIDS.

*AIDS Prevention Guide for Parents and Other Adults Concerned About Youth.*

Washington, D.C.: Centers for Disease Control, 1989.

Quackenbush, Marcia and Sylvia Villarreal.

*Does AIDS Hurt?*

Santa Cruz, CA: Network Publications, 1988.

Quackenbush, Marcia, and Mary Nelson with Kay Clark.

*The AIDS Challenge.*

Santa Cruz, CA: Network Publications, 1988.

Shilts, Randy.

*And the Band Played On: Politics, People And the AIDS Epidemic.*

New York: Viking Penguin, 1987.

## Readings for Children

Fassler, David, and Kelly McQueen.

*What's a Virus Anyway? The Kids' Book About AIDS.*

Burlington, VT: Waterfront Books, 1990. (Ages 5-10)

Girard, Lina Walvoord.

*Alex, the Kids with AIDS.*

Morton Groves, IL: Albert Whitman & Co, 1991. (Ages 8-11).

Greenberg, Lorna.

*AIDS: How It Works in the Body.*

New York: Franklin Watts, 1992. (Ages 9-14)

Hausherr, R.

*Children and the AIDS Virus.*

New York: Clarion Books, 1989. (Ages 5-8)

Hyde, Margaret O., and Forsyth, Elizabeth.
*Know About AIDS* (Second Edition).
New York: Walker and Co., 1990.(Ages 8-12)

Lerner, Ethan A.
*Understanding AIDS*
Minneapolis: MN Lerner Publications, 1987. (Ages 8-13)

## Readings for Children (About Death)

Heegaard, Mary E.
*Coping With Death.*
Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publications, 1990. (Ages 9-12)

Keller, Holly.
*Goodbye, Max.*
New York: Greenwillow Books, 1987. (Ages 4-8)

Rofes, Eric E. ed.
*The Kids' Book About Death and Dying by and for Kids.*
Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1985. (Ages 10-14)

Varley, Susan.
*Badger's Parting Gifts.*
New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1984. (Ages 5-8)

Viorst, Judith.
*The Tenth Good Thing About Barney.*
New York: Atheneum, 1971. (Ages 5-10)

# *Talking with kids about Sex*

## Organizations for Information and Referral

Advocates for Youth
1025 Vermont Avenue, NW
Suite 200
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 347-5700

American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists
435 North Michigan Avenue
Suite 1717
Chicago, IL 60611
(312) 644-0828

ETR Associates
P.O. Box 1830
Santa Cruz, CA 95061
1-800-321-4407

Planned Parenthood Federation of America
810 Seventh Avenue
New York, NY 10019
(212) 541-7800 (or local affiliate)

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S. (SIECUS)
130 West 42nd Street
Suite 350
New York, NY 10036
(212) 819-9770

## Readings for Parents


Bernstein, Anne.
*The Flight of the Stork.*
Indianapolis, IN: 1994.

Calderone, Mary S. and Eric Johnson.
*The Family Book About Sexuality.*
New York: Harper and Row, 1989.

Carrera, Michael.
*Sex: The Facts, The Acts and Your Feelings.*
New York: Crown Publishers, 1981.

Leight, Lynn.
*Raising Sexually Healthy Children: A Loving Guide for Parents, Teachers, and Caregivers.*
New York: Rawson Associates, 1989.

Stark, Patty.
*Sex Is More Than a Plumbing Lesson: A Parent's Guide to Sexuality Education for Infants Through the Teen Years.*
Dallas, TX: Preston Hollow Enterprises, 1990.

Strasburger, Victor.
*Getting Your Kids to Say "No" in the 90's When You Said "Yes" in the 60's.*
New York: Fireside Books, 1993.

Wilson, Pamela M.
*When Sex Is the Subject: Attitudes and Answers for Young Children.*
Santa Cruz, CA: Network Publications, 1991.

Younger, Frances.
*Five Hundred Questions Kids Ask About Sex and Some of the Answers.*
Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1992.

## Readings for Children

Harris, Robie H.
*It's Perfectly Normal: Growing Up, Changing Bodies, Sex and Sexual Health.*
Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 1994. (Ages 10 and up)

Marsh, Carole.
*Sex Stuff for Kids 7-17.*
Atlanta, GA: Gallopade Publishing Group, 1994. (Ages 9-12)

Meredith, Susan.
*Where Do Babies Come From?*
Tulsa, OK: EDC Publishing, 1991. (Ages 5-8)

Sanchez, Gail Jones.
*Let's Talk About Sex and Loving.*
Milpitas, CA: Empty Nest Press, 1994. (Ages 5-8)

Westheimer, Ruth.
*Dr. Ruth Talks to Kids: Where You Came From, How Your Body Changes, and What Sex Is All About.*
New York: Macmillan, 1993. (Ages 10-14)

# *Talking with kids about Violence*

## Organizations for Information and Referral

Center for Conflict Resolution
200 N. Michigan Avenue
Suite 500
Chicago, IL 60601
(312) 372-6420

Children's Creative Response to Conflict
Box 271
Nyack, NY 10960
(914) 353-4445

Educators for Social Responsibility
23 Garden Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
(617) 492-1764

Institute for Mental Health Initiatives
Channeling Children's Anger
4545 42nd Street, NW
Suite 311
Washington, DC 20016
(202) 364-7111

The Center to Prevent Handgun Violence
1225 Eye Street, NW
Suite 1100
Washington, DC 200005
(202) 289-7319

The Parenting for Peace and Justice Network
4144 Lindell Boulevard
Suite 124
St. Louis, MO 63108

## Readings for Parents


Beekman, Susan and Jeanne Holmes.
*Battles, Hassles, Tantrums & Tears: Strategies for Coping with Conflict and Making Peace at Home.*
New York: Hearst Books, 1993.

Carlsson-Paige, Nancy, and Diane E. Levin.
*Who's Calling the Shots? How to Respond Effectively to Children's Fascination with War Play and War Toys.*
Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990.

Fisher, Roger and William Ury (second edition, Bruce Patton).
*Getting To Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In.*
New York: Penguin,1991.

Hopkins, Susan, and Jerry Winters, eds.
*Discover the World: Empowering Children to Value Themselves, Others and the Earth.*
Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990.

Levin, Diane E.
*Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom.*
Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility, 1994.

McGinnis, Kathleen and James.
*Parenting for Peace and Justice: Ten Years Later.*
Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990.

Prothrow-Stith, Deborah, with Michele Weissman.
*Deadly Consequences.*
New York: HarperCollins, 1991.

Pirtle, Sarah.
*An Outbreak of Peace*.
Philadelphia: New Society, 1987. (Ages 9-12)

Prutzman, Priscilla.
*The Friendly Classroom for a Small Planet*.
Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1987.

Robinson, Nancy
K. *Wendy and the Bullies*.
New York: Scholastic, 1980. (Ages 9-12)

Seuss, Dr.
*The Butter Battle*.
New York: Random House, 1984. (Ages 6-12)

## Readings for Children

Baker, Betty.
*The Pig War*.
New York: Harper & Row, 1969. (Ages 5-10)

Byars, Betsy.
*The Eighteenth Emergency*.
New York: Viking, 1973. (Ages 9-12)

Cohen, Janice.
*Why Did It Happen? Helping Children Cope in a Violent World*.
New York: Morrow Junior Books, 1994. (Ages 5-9)

# *Talking with kids about Drugs*

## Organizations for Information and Referral

The American Council for Drug Education
136 East 64th Street
New York, NY 10021
(212) 758-8060
1-800-488-DRUG

"Just Say No" International
2101 Webster Street
Suite 1300
Oakland, CA 94612
1-800-258-2766

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information
P.O. Box 2345
Rockville, MD 20852
1-800-729-6686

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence Inc.
1-800-NCA-CALL (for referral to local affiliate)

National Institute on Drug Abuse Information & Treatment Referral Helpline
1-800-662-HELP

Partnership for a Drug-Free America
405 Lexington Avenue
16th Floor
New York, NY 10174
(212) 922-1560

PRIDE
10 Park Place South
Suite 540
Atlanta, GA 30303
(404) 577-4500

## Readings for Parents

*The Fact Is...You can Prevent Alcohol and Other Drug Problems Among Elementary School Children.*
Rockville, MD: National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, 1988.

Gold, Mark S.
*The Facts About Drugs and Alcohol.* (Third Edition).
Washington, D.C.: The PIA Press, 1988.

Gold, Mark S.
*The Good News About Drugs and Alcohol.*
New York: Villard Books, 1991.

*Growing Up Drug Free: A Parent's Guide to Prevention.*
Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Education, 1990.

Hawkins, J. David, et. al.
*Preparing for the Drug-Free Years: A Family Activity Book.*
Seattle: Developmental Research and Programs, 1988.

## Readings for Children

Hemming, Judith.
*Why Do People Take Drugs?*
New York: Franklin Watts, 1988. (Ages 7-10.)

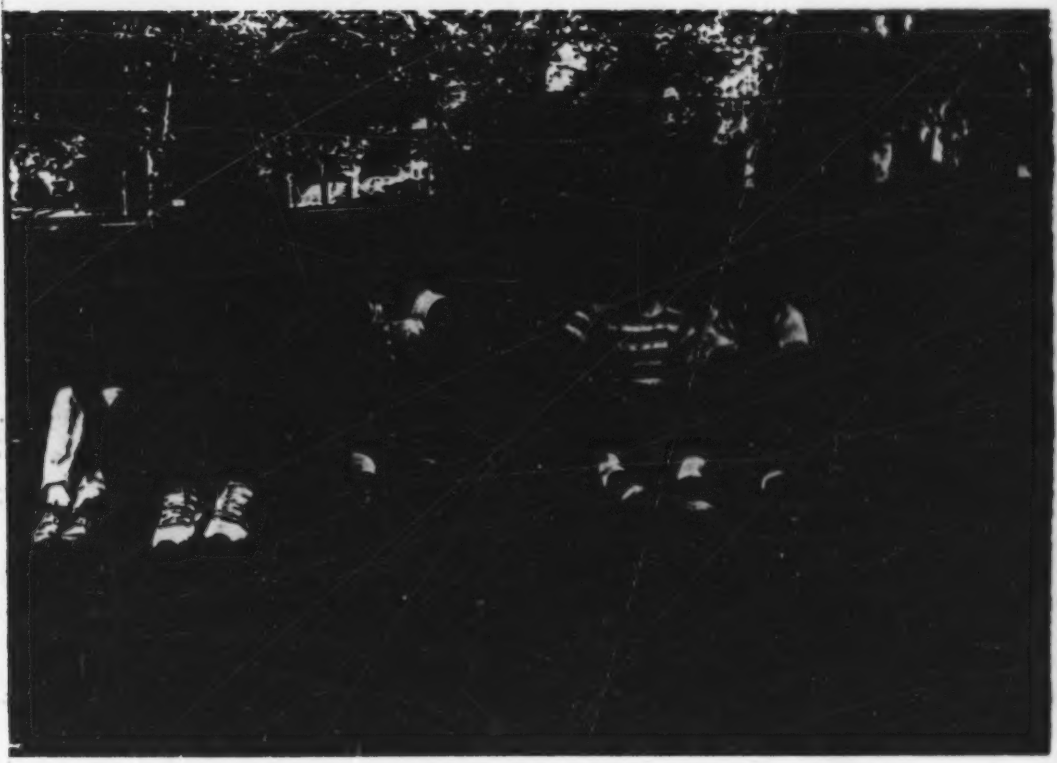
Hyde, Margaret O.
*Know About Drugs.*
New York: Walker & Co.,1990. (Ages 9-14.)

Mann, Peggy.
*The Sad Story of Mary Wanna or How Marijuana Harms You.*
New York: Woodmere Press, 1988. (Ages 6-10)

Sanders, Pete.
*Why Do People Drink Alcohol?*
New York: Franklin Watts, 1989. (Ages 7-10)

Super, Gretchen.
*You Can Say "No" to Drugs!*
Frederick, MD: Twenty-First Century Books, 1990. (Ages 5-8)

*The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now extend special thanks to the young people whose pictures appear in this booklet. They represent all our kids, who need to know that there is a safe, loving and helpful place to go to with their questions and concerns.*



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**TALKING WITH KIDS ABOUT TOUGH ISSUES**

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800 3rd Ave., 40th Fl.
New York, NY 10022
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FAX (212) 644-1740

1212 Broadway, Suite 530
Oakland, CA 94612
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FAX (310) 268-1994

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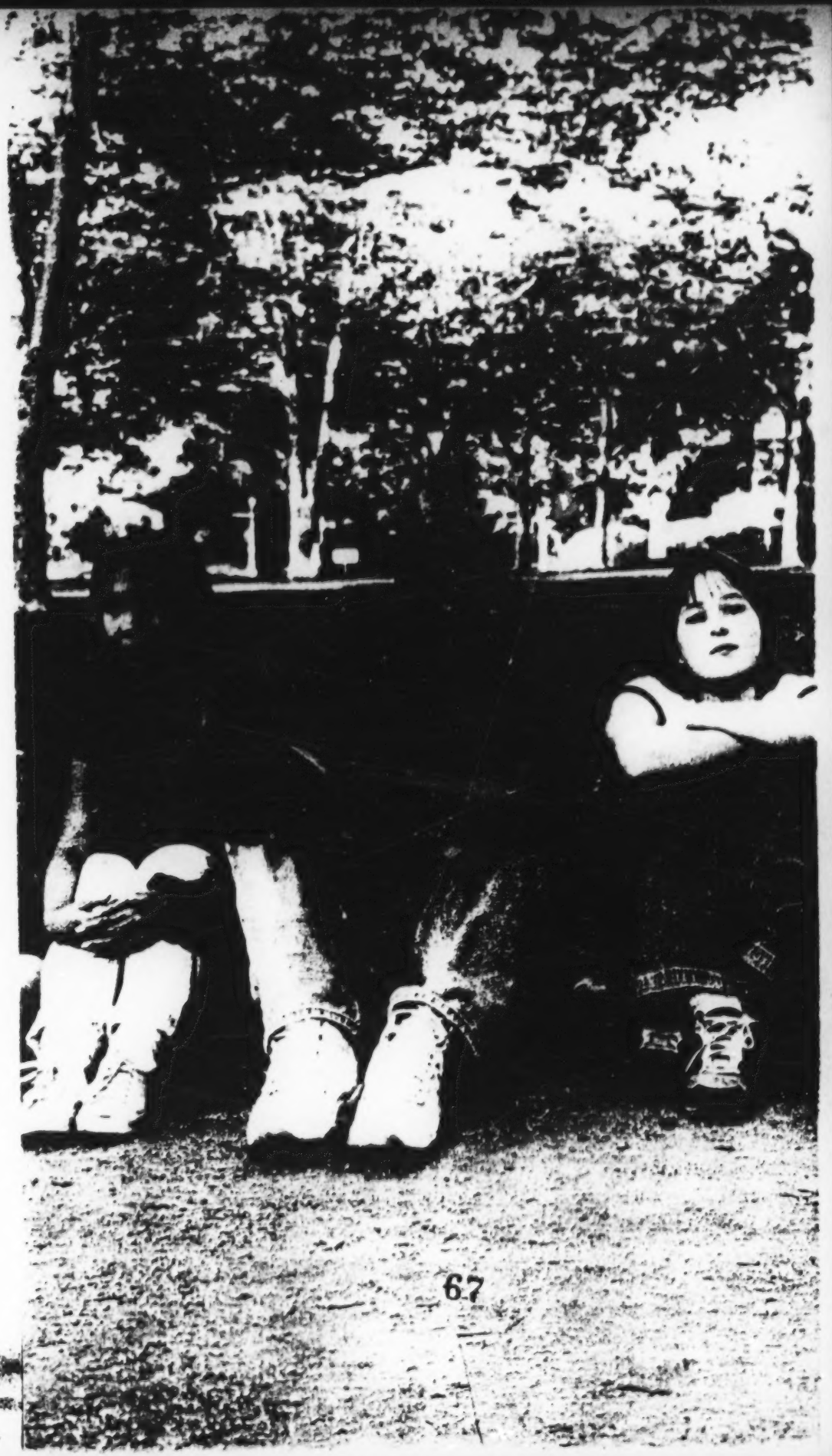

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